Forms Behaving in Time

A Conversation with David Nash

BY INA COLE

Immersed in the sensibilities of wood, David Nash has a highly developed understanding of the complexities underlying tree growth. His longstanding base at Capel Rhiw in Blaenau Ffestiniog, north Wales, provides the launch pad for his projects, many of which take him across the globe. The 200 works featured at his Yorkshire Sculpture Park exhibition (on view through February 27, 2011) employ a variety of experimental processes, carrying viewers on a multi-layered journey that winds through a labyrinth of indoor and outdoor locations. Towering shapes and squat forms convene in animated fashion, while wraith-like carbonized works shimmer incandescently in the muted atmospheric conditions of north England. There is an almost primal need to get close to the rich and textured surfaces—the cracks, crags, and undulations that offer a poignant reminder of the tree's struggle for survival, as well as the inescapable passing of time.

Opposite: *Black Sphere*, 2004. Charred oak, 250 x 250 x 250 cm. Above: *Crag and Cave*, 2004. Partly charred yew, 220 x 130 x 80 cm.

Red Column, 2010. Redwood, 135 x 135 x 600 cm.

Ina Cole: *You call yourself a researcher into the science and anthropology of trees, and there's certainly a distinct progression from the rawness of the first cut shapes to the poise of the recent sculptures. How has your work evolved since you started using wood in the 1970s?*

David Nash: It has evolved, but I'm not that conscious of it because it's just an accumulation of knowledge and experience. As the possibilities become greater, you need better equipment, and that brings new possibilities. I now like working with cast iron because it has a similar quality to wood: it has behavior, it changes, and I like the rawness of that. I've made experimental works by pouring molten bronze onto wood so that it meshes around the charred form. Bronze is a mineral when cold—it's an earth element. You apply the heat element to make it molten, and it changes into a water element while fluid. You can then pour it into a space—the air element—and it goes back to being an earth element. I've also reproduced the black sculptures. When burnt, they're no longer a wood experience, they're a mineral, carbon experience, which translates well into bronze. I'm interested in these elemental forces being amalgamated and worked at by a human mind.

IC: *Your knowledge of the different characteristics of trees is fundamental to your practice. In a sense, you're trying to tame them according to your desired outcomes, but you can never assume total control because the material alters with time. Is it the volatile character of wood that continues to challenge you?*

DN: The knowledge is so deeply within me, I just deal with it. If the wood is red, I make the most of it being red; if it's a yew, which doesn't split, I make something that doesn't split; if it's a certain size, I do something with that size. Although my material is wood, the tools I use are steel, with edges that hit or spin as in a chain saw, with lots of sharp little chisels going round. I cut as little as possible to get the form and leave the mark of the tool on the wood, so that a sense of the original shape remains in order to build a continuum in the viewer's mind. Some people criticize me for not doing much. Quite right—these are quick sleights of hand, but I've transformed a recognizable piece of wood into a stepping-stone linking the human mind, the wood, and the earth.

IC: *You give trees human characteristics and have described redwoods as benign and calm.* Red Column *has an affinity with Brancusi's* Endless Column, *but you've accentuated its organic vertical growth, whereas Brancusi was more interested in the rising undulation of New York skyscrapers.*

DN: Brancusi was making a column of breathing, which pushes out into space then comes in. It's very different from my column, which is a pile of lumps. Trees are columns; a tree has its root and its leaf, and it is building a column throughout its life. That's its capital, and the leaf is its revenue, with the root pulling it all up. *Red Column* won't stay red; it will start to go gray after nine months, after which I may char it.

IC: *Through this process of charring by controlled burning, as seen in* Black Sphere, Husk, *and* Two Sliced Cedars, *doesn't the carbonized work become a ghost of its former self?*

DN: Yes, that's what carbon does. The blackened works are about mineral, darkness, absorption. The experience of carbon is of a deeper time. Wood is closer to our own mortality, but if you blacken it, you're into another time zone altogether. I trial the work in a fire to get big texture, thick carbon, then scrape it off; I don't want people to look at the texture, I want them to look at the form. Then I burn it again with propane to get that ethereal quality. Years ago, I remember looking across a green field with black cows, and the cows appeared like holes in the landscape. In a sense, these pieces aren't there because they've become like holes. When a work is black, you see the form first and the material second; with wood, you see the wood first, then the form.

IC: *Reviewing your Yorkshire show for the* Guardian, *Annie Proulx relates an imaginary scenario in which you are half-human, half-lignum, opening our eyes to the sentient forest. Her concern is that humans have lost their spiritual and aesthetic knowledge of the forest, seeing only exploitation and utility. Do you think this is true?*

DN: "Sentient forest" is a good term—like Grimm's fairy tales, which are ancient myths

and deep, deep truths. I like to think that my work touches on these truths, and I don't stray from that. My work states an attitude of being, which is my avenue into our attitude toward the environment and toward other people. I hope that people see this interface between the living, elemental world—the environment on which we're all dependent and interdependent—and the human mind, which is in its infancy in terms of consciousness. Tree species are far older than us; there's a level of deep wisdom in these ancient things because of the longevity of their truth.

The human being needs wood—it's about fundamental survival in our environment—and this commonality of experience makes my work accessible, which is partly why I choose wood as a material. I love stone carving, but I'm too sanguine; you need to be a long distance runner for it. I get on with wood, and I can work quickly. It's also about beginnings. I'm working with the four elements, time, and space, and I put forms into time for them to behave in time.

IC: Ash Dome, *in north Wales, is a good example of a work that's been launched into time and space. When you planted this ring of trees in 1977, it was an act of optimism during a time of economic gloom. Isn't it ironic that it has reached full maturity in another era of political uncertainty?*

DN: I hadn't actually thought of it like that. It's an artist-attached work, so I needed to be near it, but its concept was longevity, as opposed to quickly changing governments and short-term policies. At the time, people were saying that we wouldn't see the end of the century, so with *Ash Dome*, I thought I'd throw a grappling iron into the 21st century. It had no interest in the millennium itself, but that was its graduation time. It's continuously spontaneous and genuinely of its place, not made somewhere else and brought in like a UFO. Most land artists at the time did an event, documented it, and moved on, but I was interested in taking responsibility. This was the first piece that needed more interference than I'm comfortable with, but I've learnt a lot from it.

I'm particularly interested in people who saw *Ash Dome* when I first planted it, and again years later. I remember seeing Rothko's Seagram murals when I was 21 and had a completely different experience—much deeper—when I saw them again at 42. The first experience was atmospheric, but years later, the paintings seemed more structural, like real thresholds or columns. The paintings hadn't changed, though; I realized that I'd changed.

IC: *As a child, you made seasonal visits to your grandparents in north Wales, where you moved as an adult. What do you recall of those early years?*

DN: My grandfather was an eccentric entrepreneur, who was periodically rich, then poor, and eventually bankrupt. He liked living in large houses and bought a house in north Wales, with acres of amazing woodland. He had five sons who all had children, and we visited as a family with all my cousins. It was fantastic.

While applying for postgraduate study, I bought two cottages in north Wales for £300. In my second year at Chelsea School of Art, Capel Rhiw came up for £200, so I sold the cottages for £1,500, which gave me enough money to install water and electricity in the chapel, buy tools, and have the year at Chelsea. Everything

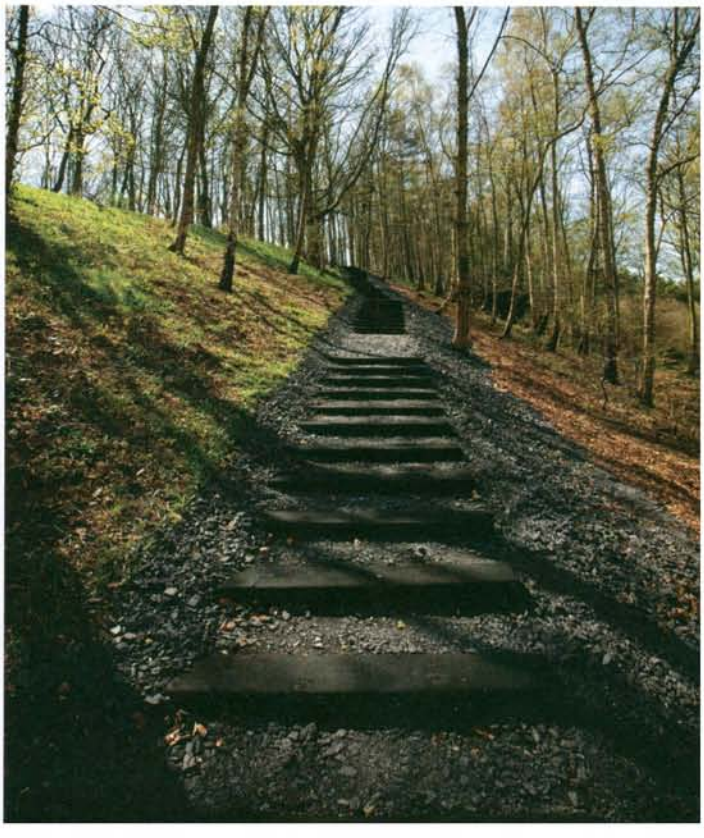
***Ash Dome*, 1977, matured 2009.**

was done for practical reasons. I stammered very badly and wanted to be a hermit. I wanted to bury myself and needed to be somewhere I liked and where I could scrape a living but be free. I didn't ask for an exhibition, but in 1973, through a beautiful set of circumstances, I showed at the York festival, followed by the Arnolfini, Serpentine Gallery, and the Hayward Gallery. I've had some amazing flukes but always had my fallback position, which was to live in Blaenau Ffestiniog.

I now have another property and studio in the South of England, near Alan Smith who sources wood for me. That one studio, a small unit in an industrial estate, has cost me as much as all the properties in north Wales—the chapel, a terrace of three cottages, a yard, and my drawing studio, which I got for under £150,000.

IC: *You have a longstanding interest in the pyramid, the sphere, and the cube, generated by Cézanne's belief that nature can be*

***Black Steps*, 2010. 71 charred oak steps, dimensions variable.**



Left: Installation view with *Husk*, *Millennium Book*, and *Pyramid Sphere Cube*. Above: *Millennium Book*, 2005. Charred beech and steel, 231 x 101 x 18 cm.

simplified into geometric shapes. What is it about this combination of forms that continues to inspire your work?

DN: Cézanne was learning in three dimensions; he was able to form paintings alluding to geometric shapes, but within his own freedom. He wasn't making a hard ideological statement. When Richard Long was asked why he creates straight lines and circles, he replied, "Because they don't belong to anybody." That's a brilliant thing to say, and I realized it's because the forms are universals, not inventions. The footprint of the pyramid is a triangle, the footprint of the sphere is a circle, and the footprint of the cube is a square.

We understand the three-dimensional world through our body size, and we read pictures two-dimensionally—they're two different perception systems. In *Pyramid Sphere Cube*, I've put them together, which people find very satisfying. The physical world is a threshold to the spirit world, and people relate to these forms because they speak recognizable truths. They're not highly complex, philosophical truths, they're fundamental: the vertical is awake, the horizontal passive, and the diagonal hugely dynamic. The whole experience is geometric, yet emotional, and everybody identifies with these forms, even children. Of course, we miss a lot now, because there's so much on screen. It makes everything seem the same—everything's virtual. There isn't any "body learning" anymore, and it's terrible for children because they should be playing with objects. It makes them very bad drivers because they haven't got that play experience of body, weight, and speed.

IC: Oculus Block *is a vast, semi-geometric cube fashioned from four fused eucalyptus trees—the most incendiary of materials. "Oculus" is Latin for eye, or in architectural terms a circular opening inviting the elements such as in the Pantheon in Rome. Is this definition pertinent to the piece?*

DN: *Oculus Block* has a natural hole in the middle, and you can't see the eye at the top unless you're inside it. You just turn sideways, go in, and look up—that's the oculus. Evan Shively, who's creating a wood yard in Northern California, called it "oculus" because of the eye. He's a Harvard man and loves words. My wife wanted to call it "big euch," as in eucalyptus. The important thing about *Oculus Block* is that it's only just square. The squaring is breathed across it, in the same way that the best of the Inuit sculptures retain the original stone, and the image is only just visible.

Eucalyptus is an Australian tree that was grown in California for locomotive fuel because there wasn't any coal. They had to make steam somehow, and eucalyptus is 80 percent as efficient as coal because it contains so much oil. It's one of the densest woods and grows quickly. They didn't cut it down for a long time, but they are now because it's taking over and forcing out the indigenous trees.

IC: *Do you have contacts around the world who inform you when wood is available?*

DN: It's mainly Alan Smith in Sussex; we've worked together for 16 years, and he knows a good tree. He just tells me about it, and I say, "That sounds good, let's get it." He has a yard, and I have the Sussex studio, so much of the bigger work is roughed out there and then hauled to Wales. We'll always keep Wales though, because of the storage facility, and the chapel is really an ongoing installation.

IC: *Many artists, including Brancusi, have had well-documented relationships with their studios, resulting in the encapsulation of their private space for public consumption. How do you feel about this?*

DN: The chapel is where the works congregate, and when new pieces arrive, they wake everything up. People come and see the work there—curators, clients, and teachers. I've never seen Brancusi's studio in its present form; I only saw it in two

Oculus Block, 2010. Eucalyptus, 285 x 195 x 222 cm.

View of works in situ at Capel Rhiw, Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales, 2009.

gallery rooms stuffed full of works. I don't want to see it like it is now; it's become very anodyne. You can't go in; you can only stand on the outside. When I visited, a flat-footed guard turned the brass "fish" to show me how it worked. At Käthe Kollwitz's foundation in Berlin, things don't get moved around enough and it felt dead. They're marvelous works, but they were suffering from inactivity. I wouldn't want to create a mausoleum; I'd rather my work was dispersed into coherent groupings for people to see.

IC: *The relationship between your works in a studio or gallery setting must present a different challenge to the decisions you make when creating work in the landscape. How do you resolve this dichotomy?*

DN: I'm not trying to work consciously with the landscape—it is as it is, outside, inside. When you make something inside and take it out, it diminishes by a third; if you make it outside and bring it in, it grows by a third. Galleries are like little temples to me. I can create an experience that I can't create outside; there are no stops outside. Ninety percent of what I do is indoors. People think it's mainly outdoors, but it's not, because wood is a material that you can borrow from its cycle of growth and decay to bring inside, and then put back into the cycle for it to go into reintegration.

IC: *Darwin invoked the idea of a tree of life 150 years ago to describe the evolutionary relationships between organisms. This relationship is now thought to be more of a web, but does his concept remain a valid metaphor for this process and for the interrelation of your work, particularly pieces relating to* Family Tree*?*

DN: I was thinking of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge referred to in the Bible, and they're not to be messed with. It was the Tree of Knowledge that got us into all this trouble in the first place. It was through my studies of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge that I became fascinated with the difference. The job of *Family Tree* is to reflect the diverse nature of my work, which is not always chronological since I sometimes make a big leap, then realize what I've done, and fill in the steps in between. I don't know about Darwin, but there's certainly huge interrelation.

IC: An Awful Falling *and* Millennium Book *emit a powerful message. It's been said that* Millennium Book *has echoes of Rodin's* Gates of Hell, *which was inspired by Dante's* Inferno. *How does this narrative remain relevant today?*

DN: This century is appalling, with capitalism, greed, and the atrocities that people perpetrate. They always have, of course, but it just goes on and on; they don't learn anything. *Millennium Book* just pitches something to viewers, and where their thoughts go is where their thoughts go—I'm not controlling that, I'm just giving them a theatrical gesture. It was originally going to be on the wall as panels, but I thought that if I brought them off the wall and joined them, they'd be freestanding. It was then that I got the book idea, hence the rusty hinges.

With *An Awful Falling*, I had no intention of referencing 9/11. I'd flown to Switzerland at the time for an exhibition of my *Crack and Warp* columns, which looked like the Twin Towers falling down. People were alarmed and asked how I'd made them so quickly, but they weren't directly associated with 9/11. When I came home, I found an off-cut with spires sticking out of it, which stood up on its own. I then made the other pieces and the drawings. I kept them completely separate from the rest of my work, and whenever I entered that room it made my hair stand on end. My other works are very healthy—they're about life—they're optimistic, funny, and joyful. It felt like war and peace.

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An Awful Falling, 2001. Beech, dimensions variable.